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CIA threat to quiet the press is challenged

By the Associated Press

CIA director William Casey's threat to seek prosecution of five newspapers and magazines would distort the use of a federal law that was never intended to muzzle the press, say several constitutional rights groups and news organizations.

At a meeting last Friday at the Washington Post, Mr. Casey complained about reporting by the Post, The New York Times, The Washington Times, and Time and Newsweek magazines. Several of the publications have run stories on US interceptions of Libyan communications.

Casey also wants to avert publication by the Post of material concerning the Ronald Pelton spy case, according to Justice Department officials, speaking on condition that they not be identified.

Any prosecutions stemming from Casey's complaints likely would be sought under a 1950 law making it a crime to willfully disclose classified information about codes, ciphers, or US intelligence activities.

Washington

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Floyd Abrams, a New York attorney known for his First Amendment cases, said Wednesday that the law Casey mentioned in the meeting at the Post "has never been used to prosecute a news organization."

The Reagan administration is "clearly trying to establish the notion that we have an official secrets act and that they can threaten the press to keep them from publishing," said Morton Halperin, director of the Washington legislative office of the American Civil Liberties Union. He said the law was intended to stop press leaks by prosecuting the leakers, not news organizations.

Secretary of State George P. Shultz, in the Philippines for talks with President Corazon Aquino and other government officials, said, "These are very serious national security problems — the leaking and publication of information that

harms our ability to maintain the security of the United States." Mr. Shultz said he was not familiar enough with legal matters to discuss any specific case, but said leaks are "a genuine problem and something has to be done."